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ABSTRACT

A model that includes three distinct syllabi for orientation courses for different subgroups of the college or university freshman population is presented. Among the groups with special needs are underprepared students who may be motivated but need skill development, and underachieving students characterized by untapped potential. One means of fostering involvement with university faculty is through participation in small, highly individualized orientation classes with built-in opportunities for one-on-one contact with the professor outside the classroom. A course for underprepared students needing academic and emotional support and skill development might include topics like setting goals and objectives, time management, note taking, reading comprehension, memory, taking exams, decision making, reducing stress, and mathematics anxiety. Courses for underachievers should focus on instilling the desire to learn within each student. Topics for class sessions should include values clarification, career exploration, time management, health and wellness, reducing stress, creativity, and taking control of life. A third orientation course could be offered to freshmen who are not at risk academically. Topics would include adjusting to college life, developmental tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood, health and wellness, and race and gender issues. This course would not have to be as highly structured as the others. Through application of student development theory to practice, orientation courses can better meet the needs of all freshmen. Contains 22 references. (SM)

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Orientation Courses:
Meeting the Needs of Different Student Populations

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Running head: ORIENTATION COURSES

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a model which includes three distinct syllabi for orientation courses for different subgroups of the college or university freshman population. Among the groups with special needs are underprepared students who may be motivated but need skill development, and underachieving students characterized by untapped potential. Through application of student development theory to practice, orientation courses can better meet the needs of all freshmen.

Orientation Courses:
Meeting the Needs of Different Student Populations

In Achieving Educational Excellence Alexander Astin (1985) refers to involvement as the key to retention. Astin further states "Frequent interaction with faculty members is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristics" (p. 149).

One means of fostering involvement with university faculty is through participation in small, highly individualized orientation classes with built-in opportunities for one-on-one contact with the professor outside the classroom. Although courses of this nature may be particularly helpful in meeting the needs of high risk students, this experience would prove beneficial for any freshman. However, student development theory and supporting research indicate that students enter the institution at a variety of levels of development. (Perry, 1968; Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978; Widick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1975). The same orientation course may not be appropriate for all freshmen. The purpose of this session is to present a model which includes three distinct syllabi for self-awareness courses for different subgroups of the freshman population.

Underprepared Students

One course could be designed for underprepared students, i.e., those entering the university with deficiencies and/or those who have traditionally earned respectable grades in high school but presented marginal S.A.T. scores. This group may be considered the "overachievers." Their needs include academic and emotional support and skill development. This course must be highly structured, and preferably would meet two or more class periods per week. Assessment devices such as Spielberger's Test Attitude Inventory (1977) and the Mathematics Anxiety Scale of the Fennema-Sherman Mathematics Attitude Scales (Fennema & Sherman, 1976) could be administered to ascertain the need for additional counseling interventions.

Topics to be presented in this course might include the following:

Getting acquainted

Orientation to the campus and community

Setting goals and objectives

Getting organized/preparing to study: Class materials, study areas, maintaining a calendar, etc.

Time Management

Note taking: Cornell format, mapping

Reading comprehension: SQ3R, annotating a textbook

Vocabulary development

Memory: Mnemonic devices, 7 ± 2

Preparing for exams: Predicting exam questions

Taking exams: Following directions, timing, techniques for multiple choice versus essay exams

Learning styles: Perceptual modality preferences (James & Galbraith, 1985), adapting to the traditional textbook/lecture format of the college/university classroom

Decision making

Career exploration

The core curriculum: Making informed choices

Health and wellness issues

Reducing stress

Test anxiety

Mathematics anxiety

Library orientation

Organizing a term paper

Academic honesty

Assertive communication

Students may be required to attend a "getting acquainted" meeting with the instructor early in the term. This facilitates involvement for the student and assists the faculty member in determining the individual needs of the members of the class. The instructor should be prepared with a mental list of open ended questions to keep the conversation going.

While underprepared students are at risk, they can be very successful if they feel supported. The orientation class and instructor must provide a nonthreatening environment, a safe haven where questions can be asked freely and the course content is stimulating but not too challenging. Sample units for the course syllabus are provided below:

Getting Acquainted

Goal: To foster involvement in the course by encouraging students to become acquainted with the instructor and one another.

Objective: To know each student's first name by the end of the third class period.

Activities: (1) "Who do you think I am?"; (2) Best and worst summer experiences on 4 x 6 note cards - divide into dyads for introductions; (3) Strategies for remembering names and faces (also serves as an introduction to memory devices); (4) Deep breathing relaxation technique

Assignment: Make a 15 minute appointment with the instructor to get acquainted and to discuss academic and career goals (each student is required to meet individually with the instructor sometime within the first 3 weeks of the quarter).

Time Management

Goal: To help students maintain a balance between academic, social, and personal demands on their time.

Objective: Each student will develop a daily, weekly, and quarterly study schedule which is practical and allows for flexibility.

Activity: Play time scheduling game.

Assignments: Develop a daily study schedule for one week, based upon that week's "To Do" list. Monitor planned versus actual activities for the week. Develop a quarterly study calendar.

Perceptual Modality Preferences

Goal: To create an awareness of sensory access channels and their relationship to learning in the university classroom.

Objectives: (1) To identify the preferred perceptual modality(ies) of each individual; (2) To determine methods of adapting the student's preferred modality(ies) to the traditional print/aural modes of instruction.

Activities: (1) James and Galbraith's Learning Styles Inventory; (2) Demonstration of perceptual modalities (e.g., print vs. visual: memorize 2 lists of 15 words, given one minute for each list--one list contains abstract terms, the other consists of nouns which are easily visualized; haptic: reconstruct models with Legos or Tinker Toys: kinesthetic: learn a sentence in American sign language), (3)Discussion of adaptations of learning styles (e.g., study groups for interactive students; mapping and Cornell format of note taking for visual students).

Assignments: (1) Write a 100 to 200 word paper describing your preferred perceptual modality(ies) and how you can adapt; (2) Write one paragraph on how your preferred perceptual modality(ies) will be advantageous to you in the world of work.

Reducing Stress/Promoting Wellness

Goal: To help students reduce or adapt to stress, and when possible eliminate sources of stress over which they can exert control.

Objectives: (1) To assist students in identifying sources of stress which they can eliminate through time management, changing eating and sleeping habits, enhancing communication skills, etc.; (2) To identify students suffering from academic anxiety; (3) To teach a variety of relaxation techniques.

Assignments: Complete the Developmental Inventory of Sources of Stress (Higbee, & Dwinell, 1988), the Spielberger Test Attitude Inventory, and the Mathematics Anxiety (or Confidence) Scale of the Fennema-Sherman Mathematics Attitude Scales or the Math Anxiety Rating Scale (Suinn, 1972).

Activities: (1) Small group presentations on health and wellness issues; (2) Relaxation techniques introduced throughout the quarter: progressive muscle relaxation, deep muscle relaxation, mental imagery, creating your own peaceful scene, various quick techniques such as use of cue words, breathing techniques, focused attention; (3) Discussion of academic anxiety and systematic desensitization and other treatment techniques (stimulus for referral).

The Underachievers

Perhaps at greater risk is the population of "underachievers," i.e., students whose standardized test scores provide evidence of great potential yet to be achieved. These are the students who are able to gain admission despite high school grade point averages which do not reflect their abilities. Lavin (1988) proposes that many of these students are tomorrow's "late bloomers." Ultimately these students could be the institution's greatest assets both while enrolled and as alumni. However, without appropriate involvement they are no more likely to

achieve in college than in high school and their performance may be marginal even if they persist. These students will not volunteer to take an orientation course; it must be required to be successful. The primary focus of the course should be to "light a fire" within each student, to instill in the student the desire to learn. Again, it would be helpful to meet with this population at least twice per week. If a means of monitoring students' progress in other courses is available, it would prove very helpful. These are the students who are most likely to "disappear," or to wait until it is too late to seek help. Attendance must be mandatory, and an individual "getting acquainted" session with the instructor is advisable.

In this course the content should be more challenging. One goal is to teach these students that learning can be fun. Instruments to be administered for assessment purposes might include the Self Directed Search (Holland, 1970), the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (Briggs & Myers, 1943), and the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1987). Topics for class sessions might include the following:

Getting acquainted

Reasons for pursuing a higher education

Differences between high school and college

Setting short and long term goals

Values clarification

Career exploration

Time Management

Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of student development

Personality type as it relates to career choice, learning styles, and interpersonal communication

Health and wellness issues

Reducing stress

Oral communication skills

Creativity

Critical thinking skills: Addressing current issues

Taking control of your life: Personal empowerment

Sample units might be presented as follows:

Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development

Goal: To help students understand the ways in which many of the challenges they are experiencing relate to their development as young adults.

Objective: To acquaint students with the developmental tasks of their peer group, and how fulfilling these tasks can temporarily create stress in their lives.

Assignment: Complete the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory.

Activities: (1) Divide the class into seven groups of 2 or 3. Have each group present one of the seven vectors and how it relates to their experiences as new college students. (2) Discuss what it will feel like to go home and live under your parents' roof for the first time after moving away from home.

Personality Types

Goal: To acquaint students with how their Jungian personality type relates to academic performance, career choice, and interpersonal communications.

Objective: Each student will determine his/her personality type through administration of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

Activities: (1) Complete MBTI in class. (2) Upon return of scored instruments provide group interpretation of results, including relationship to learning, career choice, and college majors. (3) Divide into small groups to complete a task (e.g., survival kit exercise); allow time for students to guess/discuss types within their small group.

Assignment: Write one paragraph about your Jungian personality type as it relates to your choice of major and/or career. If you are undecided, what are some careers which would be compatible with your personality type? Or can you guess your roommate's type?

How are you similar? In what ways are your personalities different? How may this be a source of conflict in your relationship? Can some differences be advantageous to a relationship?

Oral Communication Skills

Goal: To enhance opportunities for success in all aspects of the student's life by improving oral communication skills and helping students identify their feelings.

Objectives: (1) To help students understand the difference between "you" messages and "I" messages; (2) To teach assertive behavior; (3) To demonstrate small group roles and how they facilitate or hinder communication.

Activities: (1) Role plays of passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviors; (2) Fish bowl type exercise to examine small group roles, or divide into several small groups.

Assignments: (1) Worksheet - turning "I" messages into "you" messages; (2) Describe situation in which you would like to be more assertive. List the steps you will take to respond to this situation assertively. What will you say? What will you do? Now follow your own advice. What happened? How do you feel about it?

Students Who Are Not at Risk

A third orientation course could be offered for freshmen who are not perceived to be academically at risk. This class could meet once per week with the option of a second meeting per week for those students who have not selected a major and want to include career exploration as part of the course experience. Topics for the class would include adjusting to college life, the developmental tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood, communication skills, personality type, relationships, health and wellness, and race and gender issues. Since this course would not have to be as highly structured students could play a greater role in determining topics for sessions. Separate sections might be offered for traditional and non-traditional age students, for students living on campus and commuters, or for freshmen and transfer students. Appropriate topics can then be included in the syllabus to address specific needs.

Placement and Administration for Multiple Orientation Courses

Placement and administration for more than one orientation course need not become overly complicated. Students can be placed in sections for underprepared or underachieving freshmen by high school grade point average, standardized test scores, or both. The discrepancy between these two measures is often a good indicator of either overachievement or

underachievement. At many institutions students perceived to be a risk academically are already being identified through the admissions process. If special sections are designated for commuters, adults, or transfers, these students will identify themselves during the advisement process. Placement in a variety of orientation courses can be handled similarly to placement in introductory levels of mathematics. Although there may occasionally be a need to shift a student to a more appropriate section, this approach should still prove more satisfactory then a system which assumes that one orientation course "fits all."

For students who are at risk participation in orientation courses can be a significant retention tool. Mandatory enrollment is desirable. If involvement is the key to retention, it is unfortunate that more institutions do not require orientation courses for all new students.

Course Structure

Ideally, no more than 20 students should be assigned to each section. The course content does not easily lend itself to letter grades, so a pass-fail or satisfactory-unsatisfactory grading system is preferable. However, to earn a passing grade students should be required to attend <u>all</u> class sessions and complete <u>all</u> assignments. Course goals and objectives and attendance and homework requirements must be clearly delineated in the syllabus. Whether or not to administer pop quizzes, etc., may be left to the discretion of the instructor, and may even

depend upon the behaviors exhibited by the members of each class. Midterm and final examinations may be helpful means of evaluating student growth if developed to allow students to reflect upon the course content rather than regurgitating facts.

Within each class period time should be provided for student interaction in dyads, small groups, or full class discussions. Opportunities for meeting with the instructor outside of class should be built into the syllabus. Above all, the instructor must be committed to creating an environment in which learning is an enjoyable experience and students feel that they are supported.

Through application of student development theory to practice, institutions can provide orientation courses which meet individualized student needs and enhance new student retention. One standard orientation course does not necessarily provide adequate "fit" for all students. This model is but one example of how to better serve new students through consideration of multiple orientation course offerings.

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